

How To Be American: A Podcast by the Tenement Museum
Season 2, Episode 2: Relics Left Behind: A Conversation with Dave Favaloro

[quizzical music fades up]

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: Imagine someone came to your house 30, 80, or even 150 years after you moved out. They dug up floorboards, peeled back the wallpaper, and moved all the remaining appliances. Searched through every hiding place and secret corner...

What would they find?

What would the things you left behind say about you?

About the society in which you lived?

This is exactly what happened at the tenements of 103 and 97 Orchard Street--the buildings that make up the Tenement Museum. Many of the things we know about former residents come from city records and personal documents, family stories told by the residents themselves or their descendants, and years and years of research. But they also come from the things former residents left behind.

When immigrants, migrants, and refugees moved into Tenements, like 97 or 103 Orchard Street, they came from all over the world, and they came with their possessions. Their stuff.

Sometimes they didn't have much. But the things that they brought with them, and the things they acquired once here, helped shape their new American identities. But

residents had to be choosy about what to bring with them, what to buy, and what to hold on to. Space was limited. Really limited.

Think about this: 97 Orchard alone contained 22 households at one time. That's 22 apartments. 22 families. All in 325 square foot units. That's 22 families' stuff, all of their things, in very small spaces. No modern amenities, no conveniences. And no closets.

And what the people who lived there did with *all that stuff* is part of what brings the history of the building to life.

Why did we find a can of curry powder from the 1920's in 97 Orchard Street when at that time the building was largely populated by Ashkenazi Jews? Why did someone leave a half-eaten bagel behind in a fireplace? How did a bunch of raspberries get preserved for nearly 100 years, and what can they teach us about the everyday lives of our residents?

A large part of what the museum considers their most valuable finds, an average person might consider, well, trash.

But at the Tenement Museum these are the objects that make up our permanent collection.

This is the seed that was planted when we began our tour of the Tenement Museum's storage facilities where they keep the majority of their collection.

And this thought stuck with me: When we move, the things we leave behind are often quickly forgotten...so the idea that when we're long gone, our things will tell stories about who we were, how we lived and ate, or even how we became Americans...well, that's a lot to consider.

And sometimes the things we throw away without a second thought, like an old curry can, or a food scrap like a bagel, or even an empty bottle of whiskey...can actually be a lot more valuable than we think.

My name is Amanda Adler Brennan Adler Brennan. And you're listening to *How To Be American*.

On this episode, we'll take a tour of the Tenement Museum's main storage facility, located right inside our offices at 91 Orchard Street, and where much of the museum's collection is housed.

We'll learn about some of the most interesting and surprising things in it, and meet the Museum's keeper of treasures.

[quizzical music fades out]

[Fade up Dave's voice]

Dave Favaloro: So we'll open a few drawers, we'll open up a few cabinets...and we'll kinda take a look at some of the items we discovered in our historic building over the years...

And maybe we'll start here with this cabinet 4, what's behind door number four?

[Sounds of drawers being pulled out]

Let's see...yeah, this is the right one...

[Dave's voice fades down, still audible as Amanda Adler Brennan fades up]

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: This is Dave Favaloro, a colleague of mine. He's the guy with the keys to the collection.

I've been working with the Museum for a number of years. But I've never had the opportunity to check out the permanent collection up close, or have a look at where it's kept. So, this was a real treat.

[Dave's voice fades up again]

Dave Favaloro: This probably dates to the 1920s or 1930s and as you can see it is quite rusted...so this was...

[Dave's voice fades out]

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: I know the museum manages their collection a bit differently than other similar institutions, but I honestly didn't know what to expect. When I got down to the storage facility, I was pleasantly surprised. There were bright overhead neon lights, row after row of drawers for cataloguing objects, wire bins for larger items and back shelves full of antiques of various shapes and sizes. Drawer after drawer opened to so many interesting finds and oddities. And thankfully, the only mice I saw were preserved ones, they're actually part of the collection. After taking the tour with Dave, I couldn't wait to get him into the studio to dig a little deeper.

Dave Favaloro: My name is David Favaloro, and I'm the Director of Curatorial Affairs at the Tenement museum. So what that means is I lead the museum's curatorial department and about half of what I do on a regular basis, was research, exhibit development, really working with the content and interpretation of the museum. So

really very typical museum type activities, although we sort of do that a little bit differently, I think thank some of our peer institutions.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What brought you to the Tenement museum? How did you get your start?

Dave Favaloro:

So I've been with the Tenement museum for 16 years. I grew up in the New York Metro area. Had no interest in the history of New York City until I went to graduate school up in Western Massachusetts. And happened to take a public history course with a historian who not only was involved in the work of public history and historic preservation and memory and all these kinds of interesting sort of academic studies, but was also really sort of involved in studying history of New York City really broadly.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: As part of a public history course in grad school, Dave visited the Lower East Side, and fell in love with the history of New York and the Tenement Museum. In 2004, he came across a job listing for a curatorial assistant position.

Dave Favaloro: And I said, hey, I'll throw my application in the ring and we'll see what happens. And I got hired and I've really just grown with the organization and I consider myself really lucky to have had that opportunity. So here we are, 2020.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: I've found that most people who are drawn to our museum tend to have stories of their own to tell. So when Dave sat down to talk with me for this episode, I took it as an opportunity to find out a little bit more about Dave himself. I asked him whether he was drawn here because of his family's own immigrant history.

Dave Favaloro: Yes, I have an immigrant story, and I was not very interested in that history until I joined the staff of the museum, my own kind of genealogy. In fact, I've probably done more research on other people's families than my own, but kind of broadly, my father's side of the family, really goes back to Italy and in fact, Palermo, Sicily. And so one of my ancestors, my father's grandfather, my great grandfather whose name was Frank Favaloro, came from Palermo, Sicily in 1910 and went straight out to Brooklyn. He worked in the Brooklyn Navy yard. So I have connections to Brooklyn and I've lived there over the course of the time we've been at the museum as well.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: We talked about his mother's side too. His mother's parents were German immigrants. They came to the United States in the early 1950s after World War II. In Minsk, his great grandmother was killed by Nazis in a ghetto.

Dave Favaloro:

You know, I'd never had the opportunity to ask those grandparents those kinds of questions because they passed away really before my interest as a professional historian or museum professional really sort of came into being. So I have all sorts of questions I would've asked them now. They moved straight out to the suburbs on Long Island and really divorce themselves from that German identity, which now to me makes a lot of sense, right? Because, hey, I'm from Germany and it's the early 1950s, five or six years after World War II ends and people would probably think you are a Nazi.

Right.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: Dave has a good point. People's migration stories and immigrant experiences are heavily tied to the time in which they live. And the things that they live with are not only a reflection of where they come from, but also of who they become once in America.

I wanted to know more about the objects that some of our former residents have left behind, but first I needed to hear about who these residents actually were--and how their homes became our museum--to better understand what makes these finds so special.

Dave Favaloro:

You know, I think sometimes when we say Tenement museum, if you've never visited with us, that may be slightly confusing, right? Because the Tenement museum, it's very much a historic house museum, right? We tell the stories of actual former residents, the majority of them were immigrants, migrants or refugees or their children who lived in either 97 Orchard street, which is a Tenement in the middle of the block on Orchard street between Delancey and Broome Street.

So that building was built in 1863 during the middle of the American Civil War when the Lower East Side was not known as the Lower East Side. It was said known as Klein Deutschland, or Little Germany, because it was predominantly populated by immigrants from what you today would call Germany, German speaking immigrants. If you would've asked them where you from, they wouldn't have said Germany. They would have said, I'm from Bavaria, or I'm from Wurttemberg. I'm from Berlin, I'm from Hanover, et cetera. Right? Because the German state doesn't exist.

The German state didn't exist as we would recognize it until a few years later in 1871.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: 97 Orchard served as a residential building for more than 70 years. But in 1935, the building was effectively condemned because of New York State's new Multiple Dwellings Law.

In a nutshell, overcrowded buildings were declared uninhabitable if residents didn't have adequate air and light, proper sanitation, and access to provisions for fire hazards. 97 Orchard still has its original wooden staircase--a major residential fire hazard.

After being rediscovered in 1988, 97 Orchard Street was first renovated for tour safety in the early 1990's and opened to the public for tours just a few years later. Dave also gave me a breakdown of the museum's other tenement, 103 Orchard Street where our newest tour, Under One Roof takes place. It's also home to our gift shop and visitor center.

Dave Favaloro: And then of course, the 103 Orchard Street building. It's really kind of interesting in the sense that it was actually built as three separate tenements in 1888. And as part of a series of changes to the Lower East Side really when the Williamsburg bridge was built in 1903, and these three buildings formerly known as 103, 105 and 107 Orchard street, in the middle of the block became all of a sudden on the end of the block.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: 103 Orchard is just a few paces away from 97. While they're both tenements, they're quite different from one another. The widening of Delancey Street to accommodate traffic to the Williamsburg bridge, combined with the construction of adjacent buildings, caused 103 Orchard Street and its apartments to undergo significant alterations after 1888--resulting in some apartments that are much larger than those in 97.

Dave Favaloro:

The structure that we have now at 103 Orchard street really has a kind of really funky, interesting layout in terms of, none of the apartments are uniform, they're all of different sizes. And a lot of the visitors in fact to the under one roof tour, I think surprised at the size of, a relatively large tenement apartment by Lower East Side standards.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And certainly when you compare the rooms at 103 to the rooms at 97, there is that kind of, that noticeable difference that 97 is considerably more uniform and smaller than the....

Dave Favaloro:

Right. Yeah. I mean, you're talking about 325 square foot apartments, approximately four per floor compared to what's nearly a 900 square foot apartment. It has two actual bedrooms and this sort of thing. So, it's a big difference.

Amanda Adler Brennan: Yeah, it's a big difference.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: 325 square feet to 900 square feet--that's a big difference. The apartments at 97 Orchard Street were home to Germans, as Dave said, and also Ashkenazi Jews from all corners of Eastern Europe--Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and more. There were Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire--in what's now Turkey and Greece. There were Irish and Italian immigrants too.

But while certain groups definitely formed a majority in the tenements of the Lower East Side, that didn't mean there weren't people from all different backgrounds living in this area. Today, that mixture has only grown to include people from every corner of the globe.

Dave Favaloro:

And there particularly are Under One Roof Tour. For example, we tell the story of a family of Holocaust survivors who lived in that building in the mid to late 1950s. A family of Puerto Rican migrants who lived in that building really in the 1960s, 70s and beyond. And Chinese immigrant family who lived in that building in the 1960s, 70s and beyond as well.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: I think Dave put it best during our tour when he described the museum's permanent collection as a "resource for understanding." Because despite the fact that a lot of these objects are central to our knowledge about life in our tenements, most of them can't actually be seen by visitors who come to the museum.

The way the museum uses these objects, and even the way they choose to store and categorize them? Well, it's a little different than most museums or even other historic houses.

And because the collection is so unique, so special...and so weird--I asked Dave if he could describe it to me in three words. Here's what he said.

Dave Favaloro: In three words? Wow. That's really hard to do that, in such, three words.

[laughter]

Can kind of be a non-sequitur. So yeah, I mean, I think I'd probably say, first that it is idiosyncratic, right? It's fragmentary and it is utilitarian, I think, probably the words I'd grab to

describe it.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And so what sets the museum apart in terms of how we understand and manage our collection?

Dave Favaloro:

So we don't have kind of a gallery where we do sort of text on the wall, or sort of objects in cases and so on. So, we again have kind of two separate sections of the larger collection in some way. One of those is the permanent collection and those are all items that have a kind of direct link to either 97 Orchard street, 103 Orchard street or one of

those buildings, former residents, landlords or shopkeepers, and oftentimes those are things that we've discovered, left behind in the building, and as I said before, fragmentary, is really kind of, in some ways a particular way to describe those things. You know we provide those items a higher standard of care. They generally remain in storage because we don't have a kind of gallery space to share them with the public. So, the collection really sort of plays a little bit of a different role and I think we've kind of philosophically sort of frame how we think about it, how we use it, how we manage it, how we preserve it, in a little bit of a different way.

So the other section of the collection is what we refer to as the study collection. And that's really what you see on display when you take a tour at the Tenement museum. So those items as compared to the permanent collection don't have a direct link to either building or anybody who lived their own the buildings or work there, but they have been acquired as period. They're authentic period items. Say we're interpreting the story of the Baldizzi family in the early 1930s at 97 Orchard street, Italian immigrant family. We do a lot of research over the course of years, about really what that family would have owned and that this particular case as some of the folks who have visited the museum may know they were able to share their memories. In fact, one of their daughters, Josephine Baldizzi, was able to share quite a bit about what the family had, what their home looked like.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: The museum's been lucky enough to actually talk to some former residents and their families. And some, like the Baldizzi family, featured on our Hard Times Tour, have even donated personal objects to the museum. But for others, especially families who lived at 97 Orchard in the 19th century, we've had to do even more historical research.

Some of the objects are authentic to the families discussed on the tours, but most of the objects you see at the museum have been matched to our families and our apartments

through years of research.-The museum then uses these objects to tell the true stories of the families who lived in the buildings, and who would have used things like these in their daily lives.

Dave Favaloro: These are working class, immigrant, migrant and refugee stories we're telling of course. And most of the things that we have, were mass produced products even in the middle of the 19th century, right? These weren't expensive things. And so the museums perspective has always been that we could acquire new ones not brand new of course, but a replacement basically if something were to get damaged. Because for us it's essential that you're able to stand inside these 325 square foot apartments in 97 Orchard Street. For example, hear the story of how this family might have carved out a life there, adapted to life in America, thought about how to sort of negotiate the landscape of making choices, about maintenance of traditions, about things like learning English, about work life, about culture, et cetera.

Amanda Adler Brennan: (28:14)

What are some of your favorite items that have been found at the museum?

Dave Favaloro: One of my favorite is, was sort of a mystery when we discovered it in a ceiling on the fourth floor of 97 Orchard Street, in early 2008, really is part of the work for bringing the, what's now the Irish Outsiders tour, which features the story of the more family Irish immigrants who lived in the building in 1869.

And this is, not from 1869, but from the 1920s or early 1930s. And it's a sort of rusted can of Durkee Curry powder, which immediately struck me as really odd. Right? It's not the kind of thing you might expect to find in a building that at that particular moment in time was home to mostly East European Jewish immigrants or Italian immigrants. Like what were they doing cooking with yellow Curry powder. Right. What could they have

been doing with this sort of thing. And I had an intern probably now about 10 years ago whose name was Melissa Reby.

And she was really interested in immigrant kind of food ways and how that might be represented in the museum's collection. And I said there are a couple of things that over the years have really struck me as kind of interesting, or what's this doing here sort of thing. What can this tell us? And that was among the kind of things that she really dove deeply into. And what that said to us from her research was that there was kind of, what she characterized as sort of like a curry craze that was taking place in kind of the 1920s and early 1930s.

And that was just really sort of interesting to me because again, here are these immigrants from places where you wouldn't expect them perhaps to be using that kind of curry, and maybe trying new dishes, maybe incorporating that into some of the things they were familiar with. Right? We don't exactly know, but it also really spoke to this idea. I think some historians have tackled over the last couple of decades that immigrants in the early 20th century, and in the late 19th century as well, participating and really engaging with what is mass consumer culture, right? This is a brand name thing that somebody decided to buy at the store and, may also have been used by somebody who was completely of a different background than them.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: For years, historians have studied the role of immigrants and migrants in this type of mass consumer culture, as a way of establishing a kind of common ground as Americans.

Buying and using products that are readily available in one's new country, can instantly make a newcomer appear or even feel more American. And it's not just a feeling. Because their engagement in mass consumerism, especially in the early 20th century, does actually make them more American.

And food, and the way people eat and cook--especially when they are cooking foods that may otherwise not be available to them, can say a lot about this. It makes them more like their neighbors simply by having or eating the same things as them, and being familiar with those things- having access to these items, again only contributes to their complicated journey of becoming American.

But it's not only what immigrants, migrants and refugees were eating that reflected their American experience, it was also the clothing and household goods that they were purchasing and using day to day.

And some of these bits and bobs were purchased in 97 Orchard Street itself--for the whole of our building's lifetime, the ground floors served as retail spaces. So, some of the things we found were simply backstock of retail items left behind.

These objects still teach us a lot about the people who purchased goods on the Lower East Side, and the people who ran businesses out of the tenements.

Dave Favaloro: We've discovered things like, a whole sort of host of cosmetic products from the early 20th century, really from the 1920s and the 1930s. And some of the businesses that inhabited the storefront commercial spaces at 97 Orchard street appear to have been what they call jobbers at the time.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: Jobbers are sort of like wholesalers. They would purchase a large number of certain types of goods, store them and then sell them off to different retailers around the city. One of 97 Orchard's former tenants, a man called Willie Scher, was a jobber who sold cosmetics in the early 20th century.

Dave Favaloro: So we have all these really kind of interesting cosmetic products and it's a window into what somebody was doing for a living as an immigrant shopkeeper.

Right. And then, I've also really been, I think, both surprised and interested with some of like the organic materials that have survived all of these years. And so we found, things like, I think probably one of the most interesting to me is a bag of a desiccated, or they're dried out raspberries.

Which again speaks to how immigrants perhaps surprisingly to both some of our visitors and some of our listeners, right? Had access to fresh fruit and would regularly buy these things. These were discovered in a little kind of paper bag and you sort of peer in there and were all kind of dried out.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: When imagining an urban, working-class neighborhood during the late 19th and early 20th century, a find like the raspberries might come as a surprise to some. These items needed to be transported in by horse-cart and rail. But fresh fruit and vegetables were available to residents of buildings like ours...through the massive network of pushcarts that lined the streets throughout the neighborhood.

At a time when reformers were campaigning for change, or even demolition of certain buildings because of unlivable conditions, residents of tenements like ours did have access to certain small luxuries--things like fresh fruit. Things that had to be imported. And maybe to them, it wasn't even that big of a deal. I mean these were just left behind, right?

That's one of the things that makes the museum so unique. We've had this incredible opportunity to dig deep within the walls, the floorboards and fireplaces. And especially in the case of 97 Orchard Street, where the building was preserved, and virtually

untouched for years we've been able to look at our residents lives in a way that's never really been done before.

Dave Favaloro:

You know I think scholars of immigration or New York City, you know have poured over documents or listen to oral histories or review other kinds of sources that have been left behind in historical records. But nobody's ever had the opportunity to really kind of do the deep research in a building like 97 Orchard or 103 Orchard, really kind of excavate its past in all the different ways, not just with objects, but all sorts of different ways to kind of glean, how something unfolded in one particular building of what that might say as an example. Right. Is it unique in some cases? Probably. Is it representative in others? I think definitely. And so, what does that say and how does that kind of speak to how we understand this kind of broader topic that's important to us.

So, again, it's really difficult for us to say this particular thing is linked to this particular person, I think, where we do have that kind of information, it is tied to the businesses that were there, because they were both there, the businesses into the 20th century, into the 1940s, 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s. And they had receipts and invoices and things with their names on them. So you can really tie that to a specific person.

I mean, I think one of the most interesting ones, right, is, and this, the museum discovered relatively early on, and I think a really powerful way continues to be a story that resonates both with the museum staff itself. We continue to want to tell the story and with visitors when they experience it in different ways, so it's not part of a regular tour. We've done it and kind of special events and special tours over the years. But this is a, what you would think of as kind of a handbill, kind of small advertisement, if you will, for Dora Meltzer who was it says on the handle, she was a Palmist, right? Like a fortune teller. And some of the research we've done, we don't know Dora's entire story. Right. And certainly don't have time to tell the entire story here.

But she likewise was the East European Jewish immigrant, appears to been living there with some of her extended family. And was, essentially a kind of a Palmist, somebody telling people's fortunes. And it's just a really cool advertisement, with the hand audit and one side or some of them I should say, because we've discovered several of these really mostly on the first floor of the museum building, of 97 Orchard street. And as you might expect, right, some of them are in English, some of them are in Yiddish. And I think that's kind of a really interesting, has somebody's name on it. Right? So that's going to kind of really tell you specifically who that's tied to.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

So I'm going to take you back a little bit to that curry can again, because that was just so interesting to me. What kind of insight can we gain about the way that immigrants living in buildings like 97 Orchard, kind of became Americans through their access to different types of foods. We kind of so often think about immigrants bringing their own foods here and then sharing them with the people that were here. But it sounds like you're finding evidence of them taking from other immigrant cultures.

Dave Favaloro:

Yeah, I think, taking from other immigrant cultures, taking from the broader American, what you might think of as, "American culture." I mean, I think that's interesting too, right? Because what is American food? It's really of the byproduct of this kind of complex interchange and exchange between all these different food ways that have come from different places. And I think, historians who have studied this in great depth have really pointed to the role that, what they characterize as the abundance of America as compared to say in this case, Europe, right? Like you could have access say in the late 19th and early 20th century to meat in a way that you didn't back in Ireland or Germany or Italy or et cetera. Right? So, meat becoming a real staple of the American diet or things that you would say, it was an Italian immigrant, maybe only eat on festival

days or special days or holidays or right, sort of religious holidays, these kinds of things. Right.

Or that were predominantly eaten by much wealthier people in Sicily or something of that nature. Right. Much more available here. And accessible, given the kind of wages available to immigrants, as compared to what was available in Europe, of course. Right. So, but yeah, I mean, it's interesting to think about what that interplay might've been like even in the halls of a specific building, right. When your neighbor is from Sicily and you're from, you're a Jewish immigrant from maybe what's today Lithuania, is one of our stories kind of tells us in that period in the early 1930s, and really kind of forming these kind of interesting bonds and...

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And so the idea that they're kind of like becoming more American by... I mean just the idea that an Eastern European Jewish family and an Italian family living next to each other in New York would try to become more American by buying a can of curry powder. It seems, it's that very American kind of exchange of culture there, which is...

Dave Favaloro:

Right. I would even go so far to say that they on the ground, so to speak, are creating what it means to be American at that particular time. And how we think today about what it means to be American, right? They're creating what that is, what we mean by America, American food, American culture, et cetera. In these hallways and in these rooms on a daily basis. And to think about this is one building, right? Like, there are many, many more stories like this if you sort of expand that out exponentially. And so yeah, what we think of as today, American food, what it means to be American, these folks are really creating that on a kind of day to day basis.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And so other than food, you mentioned most of the items that you found were these kind of mass consumer, mass produced items. How did the access to these types of items later in the building's life affect the experience of the people living in the building?

Dave Favaloro:

Yeah. I think that both access and engagement with mass consumer culture, and what we mean by that of course is, branding things that a lot of our listeners would recognize today. Durkee spices, right? Or Maxwell House Coffee or, I'm trying to think of some of the other brand names here, right? A lot of names that you would recognize, right? We have cans of beer from places that no longer exist, but were relatively well known brand names at that particular time. And what this of course says is that, not only are you, kind of bringing your own culture with you, your culture of food ways and that's being shaped by what's available here in America as compared to maybe where you had come from.

But that you and your neighbor are buying the same thing from the grocery store shelves and having that kind of common ground, even though you may be from different places, of different backgrounds. And so I think that's a really important idea, but this among other things, including, listening to those same programs on the radio that your neighbor of a different background might listen to or going to the same sort of movies or films at the movie house, right. That these kinds of things participating in a kind of shared culture in some ways for the first time really was a kind of common ground touchstone for a lot of folks.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

So, how did the availability of these types of products change the way that the native New Yorkers saw these new immigrants?

Dave Favaloro:

Yeah, I mean, that's an interesting question. I don't know if I have a specific answer to that or that we know, I mean, I think, the other thing I'm thinking right, is that, and again, like this idea that the interchange of all of these kind of ideas, right? And people's and traditions and industrial America and the relative affordability of things like meat and other sorts of products, right? Really, create what we mean by America and American food and so on. And I think one of the things that I'm thinking when you asked that question is, a lot of these brands actually are sort of established by immigrants or their children, right? And I'm trying to think of examples here, but there are all sorts of brands that today we think of as this is an American product, as you were saying, right, you recognize on the shelf whether in the grocery store or in a museum exhibit, right?

But were created by somebody who came here from somewhere else. And so I think, it's not a complete, sort of top down process, meaning that ride's not like some, native born person, create some product and immigrants receive that, and that impacts them and keeps their lives. It's really a kind of two way sort of thing, in a kind of way of, it's communicating in some way. Right? So again, I think, whatever moment in time we might be talking about these folks are really kind of creating what we mean by American real time.

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]: When you think about it. It makes sense that the food industry would be an easy in for new immigrants, migrants and refugees in America. That's been true from the very beginning and it's still true today.

But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, newcomers in America had a connection to an often growing community, and an understanding of their cultural preferences. They were familiar with the tastes of that community, and more aware of where those tastes were not being met in the American market.

New Americans might have had access to importing connections from their home country, making it easier to set up those arrangements. Sometimes their products even caught on with other buyers, and new American brands were created.

In fact, many of our most loved products are from companies that were founded by newcomers or their children. Well known and popular brands like Progresso or Goya were founded by new immigrants in the early 20th century, from Spain and Sicily, respectively.

And in 1869, son of German immigrants, Henry J. Heinz opened a wheelbarrow selling homemade Horseradish on the streets of Pittsburgh, and “Heinz famous 57 Varieties” was born.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

So in terms of that kind of having access to these products, kind of makes this experience of becoming American a little bit more accessible maybe for these people living in buildings like ours. How much was the idea that owning these products made you more American? How much was that reality and how much was it kind of perception?

Dave Favaloro:

I mean, I think, isn't perception really the important part of that there, right? Like somebody's perception of I've purchased this name brand product and it's not something associated with my own ethnic identity, that that makes me American. I mean, I'm thinking of interviews that we've done with folks who have called 97 Orchard or 103 Orchard home over the years. And really, yeah, participating in mass consumer culture, making them feel like Americans, right? We tell the story for example of, this is a little bit later than some of the sort of time periods that we've been talking about, but,

and this is in the 1950s, but we tell the story of Bella Epstein, who was the child of Holocaust survivors that lived at 103 Orchard street in the 1950s, mid to late 1950s.

And so, she really told this powerful story about the first record player. She was born here, right? In the late 1940s, really very soon after her parents arrived, as essentially what you would think of as refugees from a displaced persons camp in Europe, having survived the Holocaust, having survived, kind of the Nazi concentration camps and so on. And so, interestingly, she tells this story about not only getting the first record player, but getting a Paul Anka record, right? "Oh, Diana," some listeners might recognize the name of that song and to her, she tells this really powerful story of that, that made her feel like an American that made her an American.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

So from what we've learned, it's possible that the things that we consider junk might end up in a museum one day from what you're saying. What's the one object that you currently own that you hope will maybe end up in a museum collection?

Dave Favaloro:

Oh, wow. This is such an interesting question because we often do, like icebreakers, among the staff, this question. So that tells you that we're thinking about this on a daily basis, which is both useful to us for our work, but just genuinely interesting. Yeah. I mean, perhaps because of, the ties or lack there of, to my own immigrant story, I really don't have things that have been passed down, I mean, like, yeah, I have some of my grandparents' immigration papers and things, but somebody might collect that, I guess, perhaps. But the thing, and I think what's interesting about identity and self identities, right, it sort of changes over time. So like, how should somebody think of you at any point in their in their life.

But, one of the most impactful experiences I've had, has been working at the Tenement museum and, so things that are associated with that, like somebody's going to find my business card and put it in a museum or like paper from where I worked and that was interesting. But yeah, I mean, it's really kind of, working at the museum has kind of defined my adult life, and in some ways and been a really sort of powerful way to think about, my own identity and the kind of place that myself and my family have in this country and what it is, what's becoming.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

It's so funny because for me, when I hear about this and I talk about this, my instinct is what don't I want people to find in a museum, so much of this stuff was hidden or fell into slats, and almost even seems like maybe they forgot that they hid this item somewhere that you worry like, wow, what are the things that you don't want found that you've left behind?

Dave Favaloro:

Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. I think, some things yes, it's pretty clear that somebody hid them there, right? Because they were, these were small apartments for the most part. And if you had a sizable family, right? The family sizes, averaged five or six individuals, but could be as large as 10 or 11 people. And where's your private space is a really interesting question.

Or what's the concept of privacy, right? Like, think about, most of us or many of us, I should say myself included, right? I had my own room as a child, right? And these sorts of things, like as a teenager, where do you put your things? That you don't want your parents to find or your siblings to find. But I also think, the majority of the stuff that is in the museum's collection or the various objects are just the kind of things that you cast off, right? In your daily life.

On the tours, when I talk about these things, I say like, imagine somebody like finds the junk mail that fell through the crack of your floor a hundred years from now. And it's just like something that you didn't pay any attention to, right? And somebody's going to try to glean the details of your everyday life and the import of that, a century or so later, is a really interesting thing to think about. But yeah, like what don't you want people to know?

Amanda Adler Brennan:

It's terrifying.

Dave Favalloro:

I guess, the way I think about that also, it is that by that point in time, I'm long gone and whatever, somebody is going to conclude about my life. I wasn't a famous person or an important person or in any sort of literal way, or the way we typically would use that term. So, hey, whatever somebody's going to find out. And I also think that's really sort of useful, maybe, one of the things I think that's really powerful about telling the stories of real people in the setting that we do at the museum is that, you're having the chance to interact with, of course story form, a real person, right? Who has personal failings and internal contradictions and they're not just...they're like humans, they're like, you and I, they have all sorts of things that they probably didn't want anybody to know about.

But this really I think allows our museum visitors to sort of empathize in a way that they wouldn't if this was just a kind of composite kind of character, if you will. Right. Kind of created a story of a, "Italian immigrant or a Jewish immigrant," based upon research and things like that, that this is a real person, they really lived and, hey, they failed. They succeeded, they loved, they cried, all these kinds of things. That's powerful.

[quizzical music fades up]

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Is there anything else that you want to tell listeners about the museum before we go?

Dave Favaloro:

Come visit the museum and see some of these things in person and face to face, we'd love to meet you.

[quizzical music fades out]

[Outro]

Amanda Adler Brennan [Narration]:

What Dave says here is absolutely true--*if you can*, come down to the museum. Take a look at the collection we have on display, and ask questions about the objects that help us interpret history and remember the past.

But you don't have to see these objects first hand to really understand why the museum values them so much. Some of the things that Dave and I discussed like the spice can which reflected the Curry Craze of the 1920s and 1930s can tell us so much about the people who used them; who lived in our buildings. And some of these discoveries were surprising even to the museum.

For me, it was thrilling to see these objects first hand; to look at some of the things left behind by residents whose lives we at the museum already spend so much time thinking about. That's one of the things that makes the Tenement Museum so special. It's living history, that's constantly developing and changing. We do our best to tell the stories of the families who occupied our buildings, but we can only tell the stories as we know them now. And that develops over time as we continue to research, excavate, and learn more.

Who knows, maybe 10 years from now we'll discover something beneath a floorboard that we never knew was there, and the whole story will change.

Thanks for joining us. Till next time, I'm Amanda Adler Brennan Adler Brennan for the Tenement Museum.

[Credits read by male voice]

Jas Chana: This episode was produced by Rachel Davila Ramirez. Off the mic is our podcast team: Angela Serratore, Katie Lopez, Emily Mitzner, Jas Chana, Jamie Salen, Katie Heimer, Michelle Moon, David Favaloro, and David Eng. Our music is provided by Title Card Music. Additional music is provided by Blue Dot Sessions. A special thanks to CDM Studios--Charles de Montebello, Tucker Dalton, and the entire CDM Staff. Please rate, comment and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. And thanks for listening.